

**HIDING BEHIND THE MYTH
OF JOURNALISTIC OBJECTIVITY**

by

Joseph B. Bustillos

**A Paper Submitted to Dr. Calhoun
of the Department of Communications
of California State University at Fullerton
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
COMM427: Current Issues in Mass Communication**

December 7th

1989

The press . . . must print the truth fully and fearlessly. It must not print biased propaganda as news. It must give the public accurate information. It must open columns to free and illuminating discussion. It must do its full and impartial duty in enabling the citizenry to conduct their democratic government wisely and successfully.

- William Randolph Hearst¹

Out of the scattered ashes of the journalistic past a standard has arisen and its name is objectivity. All who would make the journalistic trade their occupation must bow the knee and do homage to objectivity. They must learn its precepts and adhere to its principles, for objectivity holds the keys to credibility, and credibility the keys to success in the journalistic trade.

Journalistic objectivity is much more than simply getting the facts of a story straight. It is a method of packaging reality---news events, disasters, etc.²

Theodore Glasser, journalism professor at the University of Minnesota, recognized in objectivity the belief in the observable/retrievable fact:

By objectivity I mean a particular view of journalism and the press, a frame of reference used by journalists to orient themselves in the newsroom and in the community. By objectivity I mean, to a degree, ideology; where ideology is defined as a set of beliefs that function as the journalist's 'claim to action.'

As a set of beliefs, objectivity appears to be rooted in a positivist view of the world, an enduring

¹Edmond D. Coblentz, ed. (1954). Newsman Speak. Los Angeles: University of California Press. p. 41.

²Dorfman, Ron. (1987, Fall). "The Puzzle of Objectivity: The Objective Posture." Et cetera, 447, pp. 312-313.

commitment to the supremacy of observable and retrievable facts.³

Dan Schiller in his book, Objectivity and the News, noted the cultural paradigms connected with journalistic objectivity:

An invisible frame brackets news reports as a particular kind of public knowledge and a key category in popular epistemology. News reports repeatedly claim that, ideally at least, they recount events without the intrusion of value judgments or symbols. News is a map, a veridical representation, a report on reality, and hence not really a story at all, but merely the facts---this is the claim. But news---akin to any literary or cultural form---must rely upon conventions. Formally created and substantially embodied conventions alone can be used to contrive the illusion of objectivity. How else could we recognize news as a form of knowledge?⁴

As with all cultural paradigms, the principle of journalistic objectivity did not spring up in a vacuum. It was as much a reaction to the press of the past as to the challenges that were growing around it. Glasser writes:

By most accounts of the history of objectivity in journalism, objective reporting began more as a commercial imperative than as a standard of responsible reporting. With the emergence of a truly popular press in the mid-1800s---the penny press---a press tied neither to the political parties nor the business elite, objectivity provided a presumably disinterested view of the world.⁵

The industrialization of the mid-1800s produced an audience ready to support a popular press. Urbanization was on the upswing and the role of the communities was diminished. Objectivity,

³Glasser, Thomas L. (1984 February). "The Puzzle of Objectivity Part I: Objectivity Precludes Responsibility." The Quill, 72 (2), pp. 13.

⁴Schiller, Dan. (1981). Objectivity And the News: The Public and the Rise of Commercial Journalism. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 2.

⁵Glasser, p. 14.

according to Glasser, is best understood "in terms of the emergence of a new mass medium and the need for that medium to operate efficiently in the marketplace."⁶

Glasser continued:

To survive in the marketplace, and to enhance their status as a new and more democratic press, journalists---principally publishers, who were becoming more and more removed from the editing and writing process---began to transform efficiency into a standard of professional competence, a standard later --- several decades later --- described as objectivity.⁷

The growing popularity of the Scientific Method as the proper tool with which to discover and understand an increasingly alien industrial culture contributed in no small way to the furtherance of objective journalism. The use of interviews of official credible sources and juxtaposing conflicting truth-claims emerged.

Glasser writes that:

These are the conventions sociologist Gaye Tuchman describes as a kind of strategy journalists used to deflect criticism, the same kind of strategy social scientists use to defend the quality of their work.⁸

Ironically the popularization of the word "objectivity" was taking place at a time when other disciplines were becoming convinced that scientific or photographic objectivity was impossible to achieve.

⁶Glasser, p. 14.

⁷Glasser, p. 14.

⁸Glasser, p. 14. Tuchman, Gaye. (1978). Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality. New York: The Free Press.

Michael Schudson in Discovering the News explains that in the 1920s post-World War disillusion and the new science of psychology had led us "to distrust reason," and to realize that we cannot "separate facts from values."⁹

William Rowley and William Grimes, journalism and philosophy instructors, respectively, from New York State University at Albany, continued that as this was happening some journalists said:

If we cannot achieve scientific, or photographic objectivity, let us at least cling to the scientific method and make objectivity an ideal, realizing that it can never be fully achieved.¹⁰

Pioneering journalist, Walter Lippmann said in 1922:

As our minds become more deeply aware of their own subjectivism, we find a zest in objective method that is not otherwise there.¹¹

Unfortunately, throughout this period, from the 1920s through the late 1950s, while journalists might have been using the term "objectivity" in the complex Lippmann-sense, most editors continued to follow the old simplistic use of the term. Even when the older meaning had become discredited, editors continued to espouse the "just the facts," "keep yourself out of it" kind of objectivity.¹²

⁹Rowley, William E. and William V. Grimes. (1984 March). "The Puzzle of Objectivity Part II: Three-Dimensional Objectivity." The Quill, 72 (3), pp. 17.

¹⁰Rowley, p. 17.

¹¹Rowley, p. 17.

¹²Rowley, p. 17.

Sometimes it was this dual interpretation of the word "objectivity" that led to the confusion.

Journalist Ron Dorfman writes that while, in practice, journalism has become more objective than it was in the past, the connotations that the word possesses tends to pull down those good intentions:

The news media today are less than partisan, less myopic, less sensationalist, less ignorant, more reliable, more accountable, and better balanced than ever before in our history; on the other hand, at the same time, they are under more severe attack than ever before for precisely those failings?

. . . What has happened is that the public has taken journalism at its word, and the resulting disillusion has been profound.

The basics---the five Ws, quote and counter-quote, no taking sides, news-value hierarchy---were the basis of the economically useful fiction that a mass medium could tell "the news" to the entire spectrum of political, social, religious, and intellectual opinion without being perceived to be in the service of one or another faction. That this was and is fiction is reflected in the concern expressed by both journalists and others about chain ownership of newspapers and broadcasting stations and the increasing homogeneity of editorial personnel in the major media.¹³

He says that journalists need to realize that the "objective posture" is just another point of view, just another packaging or marketing device.

Philip Meyer, professor of journalism at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, uncovered some research that seemed to concur with Dorfman's contentions about a newspaper's credibility versus its apparent "objectivity."

¹³Dorfman, pp. 312-313.

According to research performed in Akron, Ohio in 1978 two dimensions for determining a newspaper's credibility were discovered. In accordance with Webster's New Collegiate dictionary the first dimension to determining credibility is based on "reasonable grounds for being believed." The second basis for credibility was whether the newspaper maintained harmony in and leadership status with the newspaper's community.

A newspaper can be believed but still be alienated if it advocates positions strongly opposed by a majority in its community or undertakes investigations or editorial positions that run counter to the perceived economic or social interests of the community.¹⁴

The research was performed in conjunction with an experimental daily feature designed to attract children to the newspaper at an early age. During the testing period a story broke in which the local Beacon Journal played a prominent role. The story was about the Firestone Tire and Rubber Co., a major employer in Akron, selling unsafe tires to the public. In the course of the research parents were asked about their opinion of the newspaper's credibility. Their reactions, given the unanticipated nature of the then brewing controversy, reflected an interesting dichotomy.

The data suggest that the public can disapprove of the way a newspaper covers a sensitive local story, but still believe what it says. They also suggest that credibility in some dimensions is quite labile and that too much reliance should not be placed on a single measurement. In that instance, the Beacon Journal

¹⁴Meyer, Phillip. (1988 Fall). "Defining and Measuring Credibility Of Newspapers: Developing an Index." Journalism Quarterly, 65, p. 567.

appeared to have lost credibility on the community affiliation dimension while retaining it in terms of straightforward believability.¹⁵

Research was also conducted independently in the Minneapolis area investigating reader's perception of the fairness of their newspapers. Special emphasis was placed on whether the readers were from one of the small suburban communities or from the metropolitan area itself, and whether the readers read more than one paper. The basic premise behind this research was:

Just as social structure intimately affects editorial decisions about newspaper content, it also affects public perceptions of the local community including media trustworthiness, and conditions the perceptions held of local schools, churches, businesses and government.¹⁶

Of all those tested, the readers from the smaller community who read only the local paper perceived the newspaper's fairness to be the most fair. The more papers these reader's read, however, the more their local paper slipped in it's fairness scale. The inverse was true for those from the cosmopolitan area that read only the one local paper. Their perception of the paper's fairness went up when the read more than one paper.¹⁷

As far as the journalist's responsibility for fostering this feeling of credibility on the part of the reader, Dorfman concludes:

¹⁵Meyer, p. 568. Salmon, Charles T. and Jung-Sook Lee. (1983 Winter). "Perceptions of Newspaper Fairness: A Structural Approach." Journalism Quarterly, 60, p. 663.

¹⁶Salmon, p. 663.

¹⁷Salmon, p 668. figures 1 & 2.

The point is that the objective posture is neither intrinsic to the reportorial enterprise nor necessary to inspire public confidence. It may indeed be having quite the opposite effect, as critics with their own agendas (perfectly reasonably) force editors to measure their own and their reporters' judgments against a scale of objectivity that often looks suspiciously like the equal-time rule.

Journalists themselves, if they could not hide behind the formulae of objective journalism, might have to learn to think about the facts they report. A little might come of that.¹⁸

Glasser fully concurs with Dorfman's uneasiness with the mask of objectivity.

Glasser found little to commend journalistic objectivity when it came to journalists fostering an uncritical attitude toward the news they report.

Because the journalist is encouraged to keep his disinterested distance, there is generally little reason for him to develop a critical perspective on the beat he covers. Glasser wrote that the objective journalist is reduced to a translator--- translating the specialized language of the sources into a language intelligible to a common audience.

Glasser noted a study conducted on Washington D.C. newspaper correspondents and their inability to handle the complexities of the nation's policies or politics:

The Washington press corps was a frustrated and exasperated group of prominent journalists more or less resigned to their roles as mediators, translators. 'To do the job . . . what you know or understand isn't important. You've got to know whom to ask.' Even if you don't understand what's being said, . . . you just take careful notes and write it up verbatim: 'Let my

¹⁸Dorfman, p. 315.

readers figure it out. I'm their reporter, not their teacher.'¹⁹

Glasser finds that objectivity makes the journalist, in the words of sociologist Alvin Gouldner, "managers of the status quo." It reduces the reporter to the role of the news-gatherer, a trashman picking up the day's events. It allows the journalist to avoid taking responsibility for the contents or end results of the news he or she presents.²⁰

Glasser cited the 1977 case Edwards vs. National Audubon Society in which the New York Times was being sued for carrying a story in which five scientists were accused by the Society of being "paid liars." Even though the reporter made virtually no effort to validate the society's accusations the paper was not held accountable on the basis of "neutral reportage"---the story was attributed and the society should bear the responsibility for its own statements.²¹

Glasser also noted that this supposed objective journalism, because of its unsatiated thirst for "official verification," tends to lead to a bias in favor of leaders and officials.

It is an unfortunate bias because it runs counter to the important democratic assumption that statements made by ordinary citizens are as valuable as statements made by the prominent and the elite. In a democracy, public debate depends on separating individuals from their powers and privileges in the larger society;

¹⁹Glasser, p. 16.

²⁰Glasser, p. 13.

²¹Glasser, p. 15.

otherwise debate itself becomes a source of domination.²²

Interestingly Glasser placed journalistic perspectives head-to-head in comparing the attitude of the venerable Walter Cronkite with that of John Dewey:

A few years ago Walter Cronkite offered this interpretation of journalism: I don't think it is any of our business what the moral, political, social, or economic effect of our reporting is. I say let's go with the job of reporting---and let the chips fall where they may.'

Contrast that to John Dewey's advice: that 'our chief moral business is to become acquainted with consequences.'²³

Rowley and Grimes tried to garner the best parts of journalistic objectivity while answering its critics by placing the concept within a tripartite structure: Factual or observational objectivity, dramatic or aesthetic objectivity, and moral or ethical objectivity.

The first two parts involve getting the hard data and the emotional quality of the event or experience straight (this is certainly a more honest approach than feigning the part of disinterested observer). The last third addresses Glasser's contention about developing a feel for the moral implications of a story. The problem I have is with Rowley and Grimes' explanation of the last part:

This is an act of conscience. It means clearing one's head of preconceptions, prejudices, stereotypes, as one perceives and evaluates the facts, so as to

²²Glasser, p. 15.

²³Glasser, p. 16.

present the moral issues involved in the situation clearly and justly.²⁴

Did Rowley and Grimes just ask us to clear our heads so that we can evaluate the facts? Evaluate the facts with what? The basis upon which one makes an evaluation is based upon ones preconceived notions and prejudices and stereotypes. The problem is not a matter of "really" clearing ones head. That is a foregone impossibility.²⁵ The problem is in openly acknowledging the presence of these traits.

Dorfman writes about owning up that the very process of making a news story ready for print or broadcast involves elements of subjectivity:

I write this not by way of a proposal, but merely to suggest that the world would not come to an end were American journalists to admit that an intelligence was a work in the preparation of their reports. For that is what is meant by a "point of view"---evidence of an intelligence at work. It is as true in observing human affairs as it is in the world of nature that, as Einstein postulated nearly a century ago, if you don't know where you stand you can't figure out what's going on around you.²⁶

Much of the noising being made about journalistic objectivity centers on the need to assure credibility in the profession. One of the more interesting pieces of research that

²⁴Rowley, p. 18.

²⁵Beattie, J.H.M. (1984). "Objectivity and Social Anthropology." Objectivity and Cultural Divergence. Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series, 17. Brown, S.C., ed. p. 2. Noted social anthropologist on "facts": "Anthropologists are no less aware than other scientists that 'facts' are not 'given,' but constructed, with the inevitable help of concepts. This has been generally understood since Kant. To quote the sociologist Werner Stark: 'a fact, in both the common and the scientific meaning of the term, is always something already in some way shaped and made concrete by our mental activity. Facts only stand out from the chaos . . . when we put some question to reality.'"

²⁶Dorfman, p. 314.

I stumbled upon was a piece by sociologist Lance Roberts called "Presenting Qualitative Research Findings: Contributions of the New Journalism." Roberts proposed using techniques derived from the field of New Journalism in the use of writing sociological profiles.

New Journalism grew very much as reaction to the cold detachment of objective journalism. New journalism typically employs a prose or narrative writing style more commonly found in fictional writing. It makes no qualms about allowing the journalist active participation in the story.

With this thought in mind, Roberts suggests that sociologists use the presentation methods of new journalism to make their participatory observations come to life. Roberts commented that journalists often envy sociology's use of statistics and surveys to attain a level of objective assessment. But while the journalist is drooling for a bit of that "indisputable credibility," the sociologist is longing for the human texture of the new journalists methodology.²⁷

Roberts made the following comments pertaining to objections that would arise from advocating this position (there is a direct

²⁷Roberts, Lance W. (1983 Fall). "Presenting Qualitative Research Findings: Contributions of the New Journalism." Cornell Journal of Social Relations, 17 (1), pp. 19:

Meyer [a journalist] laments what he perceives as journalism's failure to match social science's advancing abilities. He claims that although social scientists were at one time similar to journalists in that they 'relied on observation and interpretation, collecting the observation from public records, from direct participation, and then spinning out interpretations,' such is no longer the case. In Meyer's view social scientists now use advanced computer technologies and statistical techniques, and are experts in finding facts, identifying causes, pointing ways to correct social problems, and evaluating the efforts of such collection' [Meyer, Phillip. (1971 July-August). "The Limits of Intuition." Columbia Journalism Review, p. 15.]

correlation between these objections and objection that traditional journalism finds wrong with new journalism):

Although guidelines for presentation are unable to transform biased observations into objective ones or make strong inferences from weak ones, these devices can, if employed indiscriminately, lessen a work's credibility. Imprudent application of these suggested guidelines may consequently weaken a reader's appreciation of even properly collected data. User discretion is essential for the appropriate application of any methodological device and, not surprisingly, some researchers display better judgment than others. This proposition's validity is illustrated by the wide range of quality found in experimental and survey procedures, as well as qualitative ones.²⁸

It is evident from the sociologist's point of view that what is sacrificed in placing the material in this format is gained again in its human quality.

The journalistic and scientific crafts do share a set of interests, however; both observe human conduct, describe it, and address the question: 'What is going on around here?' Moreover, given the present state of the science, there are reasonable arguments suggesting that sociology might benefit from more qualitative studies emphasizing the description over explanation. Such suggestions are entirely compatible with a scientific stance which seeks to explain actual rather than hypothetical events.²⁹

X X X

²⁸Roberts, p. 25.

²⁹Roberts, pp. 26-27.